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# CIA has new listening in Southern Africa

By STEVEN VEGH

The CIA has a new listening post in Southern Africa. The facility, based on Mbabane, Swaziland, will give Washington increased access to intelligence information about the region's progressive frontline states.

The monitoring station will operate under the aegis of a U.S. Commerce Department organ called the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), the stated task of which is to "report, on behalf of the U.S. government, information openly collected from public information media" in other countries. Despite this U.S. State Department description of FBIS work, the outfit has long been suspected of being a cover for the CIA, and the connection was confirmed to the Guardian last week by a CIA spokeswoman.

"We really don't seek to get any kind of high profile for FBIS [employees]...." explained the CIA's Cathy Pherson when contacted by this correspondent, "because FBIS is part of CIA. When [these employees] are overseas they are identified as FBIS and really for their own safety," she continued, "we try not to give them a big profile since they are pretty vulnerable."

The Mbabane station discreetly began operations in late 1981, under an agreement signed last August between U.S. and Swaziland officials. Not until Jan. 14, 1982, however, when Zimbabwe's Salisbury Herald ran a piece about what it believed was the impending setup of the listening post, was there any notice of the event in the region's media.

## FIRST OF ITS KIND IN REGION

In the Herald account, a U.S. embassy spokesman in Mbabane, John Steel, was reported as saying the FBIS office would be "the first of its kind in the entire Southern African region." The staff would include "eight or ten" Southern African nationals responsible for reading area publications and "listening in" on radio and television broadcasts. The post's administrative head, his deputy and the broadcast engineer running the monitoring equipment would be U.S. FBIS employees, he said.

"[The station] is only for receiving, not for broadcasting or transmission," emphasized Steel. "It is difficult to say how many countries will be covered," he said, but all Southern African countries are

post's receiving equipment. Steel told the Herald the station was being set up because "his government was interested in knowing what is going on in the world in general, and interested in what is going on in Southern Africa in particular."

According to editor Louis Wolf of Covert Action Information Bulletin (CAIB), a watch-dog publication that closely monitors the CIA's covert operations, "the implication is that FBIS [i.e., the CIA] is not able to cover Southern Africa as well as it would like."

The CIA has a vast communications headquarters for Africa located at the U.S. embassy in Monrovia, Liberia; another, smaller station is located at the embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. Apparently the long distances separating these two facilities from Southern Africa had prevented U.S. intelligence officers from listening in on transmissions—public and nonpublic—made in that region. Establishment of an FBIS station gives access to all telecommunications activity in the area.

"[FBIS is] a perfect front to have the kind of monitoring antennas that might otherwise be somewhat suspicious," observes CAIB coeditor William Schapp, who further pointed out that "microwave interception is a giant field." Microwave interception involves eavesdropping on telephone, telegraph and other facilities—communications which, in violation of FBIS's purported role, are nonpublic in nature.

One particular target of the CIA's new FBIS post may well be neighboring Mozambique. The distance between Mbabane and Mozambique's capital at Maputo is less than 120 miles and alternate intelligence facilities, like the Mbabane station, are no doubt needed by the CIA in the aftermath of its abruptly terminated, Mozambican operation last year.

## DATA PASSED TO SOUTH AFRICA

At that time, six CIA agents were expelled from Mozambique March 4 on espionage charges. Among the six was Arthur F. Russell, telecommunications specialist for the CIA within the embassy. The intelligence these U.S. embassy officers collected was, said Mozambique, also passed on to South African army and intelligence agencies. This, according to Maputo, directly aided Pretoria in its Jan.

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the current consular officer at the U.S. Embassy in Swaziland, Wilford J. Scharett, has an established background as a CIA officer.

As outlined in CAIB, No. 9, Scharett was posted at the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as of November 1976 in an attache position. As of November 1977 he was assigned to the embassy in Accra, Ghana. Though his official diplomatic title was "attache political," he was actually serving as the CIA deputy chief of staff—the number two CIA position in Accra, according to Covert Action research.

Scharett has been at his Mbabane location as of February 1980 and functions as CIA chief of station in Swaziland, CAIB reports. It is possible that between the dates listed here he served in other embassies, but generally the CIA's officers stay two to three years in one place.

FBIS staffs and facilities are separate entities from Washington's Voice of America (VOA) stations that do broadcast programs with radio transmitting equipment. Interestingly, a Southern Africa Voice of America station was recently established in Selebi-Phikwe, Botswana. As stated by a VOA spokesperson, "a 3-year agreement with the government of Botswana was signed on March 28, 1980; construction began Dec. 15, 1980 and the station went on the air Sept. 13, 1981." U.S. intelligence agents have sometimes used VOA employment as convenient cover for covert intelligence gathering.

A puzzle remains as to why the presence of the Mbabane FBIS station was confirmed by the embassy. "They rarely, if ever, announce that they're setting up an operation," observed Wolf. Public knowledge of the FBIS post caught even the CIA main office in Langley, Va., unawares. "It sort of takes me by surprise that [the Mbabane embassy] would give numbers of people and figures," said CIA spokeswoman Pherson.

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